



Aruba's rescue operations shine during a day of exceptionally heavy winds

Tuesday saw exceptionally heavy winds over the waters of Aruba as a surprise squall briefly took the island by storm. Various boats and two windsurfers experienced difficulties, most notably the pleasure boat Jolly Pirates, which because of a sudden gust of winds of over 46 knots keeled over, took on water, and capsized. The boat was returning from a morning snorkeling trip with thirty-eight passengers and four crewmembers on board, including owner/captain Harold Buser.

Harold's wife and co-owner of the Jolly Pirates, Carla reported that the assistance efforts of the other watersports operators was "exemplary and gratifying" as parasailing boats and dive operators rushed to the scene just off of Malmok. Rescued passengers cited the efforts of Jolly Pirates' crewmembers Ron and Dion as exceptional as one used the dinghy to retrieve guest in the water, and the other swam out with life preservers, dragging people to the upturned hull where they could await pick-up. Aruba's Search and Rescue Foundation (SARFA) and the Antillean Coastguard were soon on the scene to locate and retrieve passengers and bring them safely to shore at Hadicurari. Carla particularly offered thanks to Martin Molina of Pelican Adventures and Emmet and Suzanne Kimball of Unique Sports of Aruba. Divers were busy until late in the evening retrieving possessions from the bottom of the sea, and Carla stated that the one passport lost was found and returned. She also reports receiving calls all evening from guests with reports of strangers finding and returning their beach bags and personal items with identification.

"It happened so fast, that really nothing could be done to prevent it," was the opinion of Rand Wichham of Pennsylvania, on board the Jolly Pirates' with his family. "We could see this sandstorm coming off the island and then the next thing we knew the boat was keeling over and began taking on water, and it seemed like a matter of seconds and it was completely capsized." A few complementary beers at the Moomba Beach Bar while police took statements, and being on dry land appeared to cheer most of the passengers after their ordeal.

Papito Colmencia of the Aruban police confirmed that three other boats experienced problems due to the sudden high seas and unusually strong winds. Two fishing boats were also rescued without mishaps, and a boat on its way to Curacao broke its mast, but managed to make it safely to its destination.

The Jolly Pirates eventually drifted to the area in front of Hadicurari, where it stayed overnight. Owners report salvage efforts will be attempted today by using airbags to float the ship and tow it to Barcadera. Everyone involved agreed that it was a quirk of nature that caused the difficulties, but a quick response by watersports operators and emergency services along with Aruba's police handled the event smoothly and efficiently. Chief Commissioner of Police Peter de Witte expressed that it was sad that it happened, but reassuring to know that Aruba's rescue services and waterfront professionals are up to the task of handling such an event.